

CIRCLE WORK

A Thesis

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Master of Fine Arts



by

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Christopher Kempf is from Fort Wayne, Indiana. His work has appeared in *Rattle*, *Sycamore Review*, *Whiskey Island*, and *The Comstock Review*, among others.

For my parents, who taught me to read.

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*"We dance round in a ring and suppose,
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows."*

-Robert Frost, The Secret Sits

Donuts

In earnest is how the weathermen tell it the powder
thick now & with conviction as if to make up for this

or this
what is

really
a whole winter of mediocre snow.

On the radio

they're calling for more
inches per hour
is how & here my father grabs the keys & tells me son
it's so late in the season's
the only reason I need. It's March. My father
is three beers deep & we don't
speak much except

sometimes. These are the kinds
 of word
 games my father hates just say a thing he'd say
 & so in the front seat of our Chevy he says these
 are donuts.

Grips the ribbed wheel & spins. I think

of those maps in the Middle Ages the places for which they had no language [in Latin script]

hic
sunt dracones man. My father
opens the clutch pumps the E-
 brake & waits maybe
 one

& then
the column the car gassed up & suddenly spun
he says my son except he doesn't would you like

to drive.

I don't know what to say now maybe

Stack Sex

Of course this is not about me. Celibate. Older now
than I have ever been and dumpy looking as fuck.

He is really much better for this— six-pack, hamstrings
like something Fred would hang in the Flintstone's freezer.

He's seated on one of those wooden, library stools, the kind
designed simply to reach the top shelf and never intended

for sex, though they seem to be making it work. She is naked.
She faces him in exactly the same position *I* would use

if given the chance. If someone blonde, with a body
like that asked me. If I did this— it. Oh

never mind the reason, she is beautiful I might as well say it.
Him too, in that way most things human are half-

animal. Hamstrings, skin
glistening as probably no skin has glistened

in this room, rare books lining the walls in row
after row of expensive leather. They do not see me. They heave

back and forth on their tiny, squeaking stool
while all of civilization rots around them.

The King James editions fidget on their shelves.
The First Folios smolder, and suddenly

they are somewhere very far from here,
where everything is jungle

and what a man will be is still a secret, like fire
and how to please a woman. Where all night

huge cats prowl the dark undergrowth outside their cave,
but inside they are a book that will never be opened,

and are warm and more human
than I will ever be.

Cutting In

You want a job done right is what
he'd say, *paint it*

yourself. And so, the summer my grandfather died I
loaded my rollers in the trunk and took off

east to Cleveland. We'd decided
when he was alive to sell the place,

and painting, the trade I'd done wrong
seven summers in a row— whole

gallons spilled across the concrete—
became somehow the job I was allotted.

When I got there, the pink
house on Irene he raised

with his own hands, I unpacked
the back of the car and the cabinets

in his basement workspace. Blades.
Dusty brushes. Awls. These walls too

would need it, and this would mean
painting the decades

of measurements he'd made
along the door frame— four and a quarter,

seventeen feet, also, in almost illegible pencil,
a grocery list and the incremental

heights of three children he worked
through Catholic school and college.

It covered in one. I cut in
the ceiling he'd painted maybe

a year before he died, his line an absolute
level edge I held

the brush up to and tried
to follow, my wobbling like the way

his hand would shake those last days. I patched
the holes he left, the tiny

imperceptible center
of a crucifix he'd fixed to the wall, which became,

the day we placed it beside him, the single
unfaded space which needed no painting.

Estate Sale

That the walls were pink meant painting
everything again, the grandchildren traveling back
from every corner of Ohio to help
sell the house he'd painted
the color of love. It was

July. By noon our shirts were soaked through
and the blue tape we'd laid had peeled
from the heat. We took a room each
and didn't leave
until it was finished, the family
sweating together the way
he'd come home Sundays too, that *tired*
ain't half the word kind of work.

On the Philco in the living room— 2Pac. I remember
how strange it seemed, that crude music
on a machine I believed
would only play Beethoven. Like maybe
the gods had fallen, or Papa,
wherever he was, was rolling over
in heaven to hear it.

Here, though, our wives and mothers
made dinner in the kitchen,

Italian sausage and pasta
wafting through the house as we sang
and painted and prayed it was good work,
that what he'd taught us years ago, the great
and ancient art of building a home,
would hold. Hear

again the groaning linoleum, the crack
of beer cans we drank at plank tables
in the driveway that night, our plates
piled high with love and what
they told us next morning
had sold.

Summer of Love

is not the way I'd phrase it, though yes she mentioned it incidentally
our second date and okay
maybe I was afraid. In bed already that night

she took my hand and held it, trembling,
against her chest, that mess of X's the doctors left
like raised Braille when they broke her open. She told me

it was her own
twin took all her oxygen, her heart
an engine clutching like someone
who'd just come up
for air and discovered it wasn't.

The muscle's rub. The raisin. *The reason*

I love you is because. And what

I could not say
I have said already, that really
this isn't working. That what I want from life is something
smooth and easy and to speak
of things like ugliness and love only
from a distance.

And when she lifted her shirt, skin
like re-worked circuitry, I said
nothing and touched her, once,
in the single, unscarred heart of her— *here,*

I said and spent
all night tracing the raised
lines they left me.

Time Lapse

We are not the first to have done this. Here. The hard
day crushed out like a cigarette, giving itself,

all sacrifice, to night, to Mike's
harder lemonade and the way,

after three beers, I'd buy you
any ring you wanted. We met yesterday.

Σ

All afternoon you've studied statistics and things
I do not understand like probability and histograms (this
has always sounded like a disease to me), how, and with
such little effort to render me

nervous as a child again on the edge of your bed.
My palms sweat, I switch positions a million times.

Σ

Outside, all of Collegetown is coming
alive, lifting itself, again tonight, into singing and drink. I think

of the rows of houses lit up like tiny cities, how, inside each
a girl is curling her hair while her boyfriend waits and watches

animals killing things on TV. In the next room, your room-
mate screams to the receiver she has needs too it's tough, this distance like a history

of violence. Here, though, your old radio is how
love should sound, something almost ridiculous and low

I know from 8th grade dances— Mariah Carey or K-Ci & JoJo— those
songs for which the wall was my only accomplice.

Σ

It's played Elvis and Van Halen, the how-
can-we-not-take-our-clothes-off-right-now kind of music, and news

from three wars and a wall falling.
All the previous occupants (that phenomenon

of a college town)— kids and before this
an elderly couple who loved

McKinley and to lay up very late speaking German—
circle in their Oxford and bobby-sock slow dance.

I think of them like a sped-up film of flowers unfolding, that time lapse
like magic almost, how mold

overtakes a tomato or men
scurry furious as ants across their scaffolding.

Σ

We dance awkward as all
hell until we are just

one more couple coupling up for the night. I know we are
barely touching but such is love

in the 21st century with our distance and rituals
of kissing, which began, anthropologists say, in caves between a cave-

woman mother and her baby. I bend to your face like, of course,
a caveman, our plastic

glasses clicking their Morse code, their short-
short-long, short-long.

When I take them off you go
blurry like the ballerinas in Degas paintings, until the probability

of us ever having existed is little enough to love
the way my hands fit immaculate in your back

pocket and all
the walls around us.

How to Read "King Lear"

Though again this semester no one has.
And not that I can blame them. Eighteen. Too
in love with each other's sudden breaking
into beauty to bother much with missed
recognition. They sit blank-faced, paging
through hangovers and know only the way
their bodies talked all night in a language
like Shakespeare. That strange and distant. As when,
far from this place, their parents will lie down
in dumb, unfamiliar beds. Will bathe each
night and need my students there, who stare now
into the mirror you know everything
literature is (this at least) and I have
wanted to be, and cannot see this yet.

Masturbation

"first hardon milky mess"

-Frank O'Hara

Later would come the days I did it
seven times or more, months
like a fever I dreamed
of Leah Dwire in dark jeans and seamless,
G-string panties, and gradually
nothing, my left hand
a jackhammer under the covers, pumping
with that raw ferocity you see
in small dogs or pornography.

I've forgotten most of those nights, the almost
pneumatic action of my arm, the endless
litany of websites and nine-
hundred numbers. What
I remember is peeing
in my dreams, Pollacking the walls and when
I woke my shorts were inexplicably stiff. This

was the first time— lights
from the ceiling fan in my father's office bright as God, the girl
completely in my mind. It was Friday. My father

had left for the night and I was
suddenly rubbing, some
rudimentary caveman kind of motion like before we had thumbs
or understood what would happen exactly. As in

the cave those first days he laid there afraid and lacking
the language for this— his wife
gone for the night and no one
to keep him company or to love him. He watched
the fire for awhile, and when this (his
greatest discovery til now) was no longer amusing
he moved his huge, caveman hand to his loincloth. Of course
what happened was an accident, as all

evolution is, all limbs and empires and poetry,
but he loved it— that color
he'd never seen before or believed
could come from a body like his, like milk

except this was his wife's and when
she returned he told her, in words
she did not understand yet, of love, of countries
far from here and how he'd stood there
in the bright, hard place of his cave and cried out *I*.

First Date

We are driving to the Applebee's on 13, classical
music, I don't know, Mozart
on the radio as we drift north of town
talking of Bach. The suburbs hum. Somewhere,

far from the air-conditioned
capsule of my Pontiac, it is summer,
and dusk comes on runny
like watercolors. Our conversation goes the way of

all first dates— number of brothers, and what
is your job, and college, yes, that
was a good time— the two of us sculpting
a perfect, impressive world

in which I do not sound stupid or stare
too heavy at her breasts, that pale blue
tent they make of her sweater. It is somewhere I love
all classical music, and movies in French.

Also small children and dogs. That horrendous
sweater. I have never farted in bed here
and pulled the covers above my head to smell it. What sex
I want to have with her, I want to have

only after several months, and maybe
not even then unless she's ready. I do not sweat, have never
drank Natural Light or licked
shots of vodka off a sophomore's body. Blowjobs are gross.

We're going on like we're broken
records when I round a curve and hit the brakes. A buck
has wandered onto the road
and sits there shitting, not at all like you

would think a buck would shit, more dog really
than deer, rear haunches dropped in a delicate,
19th century squat. He's forgotten, I think, the way
it's supposed to go, the graceful

leaving of excretion somewhere in the woods
when no one's around. We sit there staring, nowhere
to run as the dark buns blaze up in the heat and the air-
conditioning breathes between us.

Leah lowers her head. I rev
the engine, expecting
certainly he will be ashamed when he sees us, and run. It is really
not like this at all. He lifts

his miraculous antlers, looks us
right in the headlights as if
we've interrupted something wonderful, and walks
to a new patch of asphalt to finish his business.

Shitting. Because we can
wait. We have
all the time ever created
for dating.

Apprentice

It began, you understand now, with that episode
in the temple. You told him *home* and how he responded

was *no*. *My home*
is here. This is, of course,

paraphrase. You found him
later playing savior with the Sadducees, and when you asked him

he said *listen, my Father's business*
is winning. You'd worked

all your life not to hear this. You think now of nights
you planed tables and turned

the joints of cabinets til they matched.
How once he could not sleep and you showed him,

with his bear and blue nightgown, your tongue
and groove, your good

cut. Lumber all the way from Cypress.
For awhile he'd sit in your workshop and watch

you make tables of the day, the desert
spreading its temptation like a plate. You picture his broad back, and the fact

he had to. The sand. Some pinnacle the wind
worked to a toothpick and him

reading Hebrew at the base.
The business of love is something un-

masterable like beauty or dying. I am no savior but my father
crashes cars for a living. That language

I still don't understand. You stand
in the crowd and how he carries or bears

this is a mystery. They raise him into place. *That, you think,*
that he built to last.

Porn

We sat rapt on my roommate's futon, the four of us with nothing better to do in those days than drop our jaws and gawk.

He was huge, the size I imagined a man could be only after several operations and gallons of those creams I'd seen online, cock like the kind on dinosaurs, like Florida hanging from the mainland.

We listened in silence to the cries of his small blonde, body pent between his legs like a stuck butterfly while they fucked. Somewhere there was music, the soundtrack half elevator half rave but right, it seemed, for a scene

like this— clean skin glistening in spray-on sweat, her slick, unblemished breasts, her yes like a no. No,

not one of us spoke. We were thinking, I am sure, that surely it'd be like this, our own thin dicks like fingers filling with blood as we wondered what it would be like the first time—

Theresa Gilloon's futon while her roommate was gone, or, in more wistful visions, some impossible name like Kayla Kleevage or Veronica Sin, the peninsulas of our dicks swinging from side to side

as we avoided the cameras and moved cool as movie stars. We lasted for hours, the girl bent in every angle of pleasure

we remembered— the Eiffel tower, the trapeze— her *please* filling the tiny dormitory of our minds while music played from a radio somewhere though there was none. It was nothing,

you already know, so consummate when we did it. We finished in seconds. We left. Later we'd admit everything a poem won't show— how it goes

sticky and limp, how life wears tattoos and you sag and are sweaty and come back again and again to watch someone insist it is pretty.

Working

Those winters we'd shiver
in his truck Mondays, immigrants
and college kids crouched together

in the dark belly
of that big Ford Luis bought one
summer he could save.

Too poor to pay
the diesel he'd need
to feed it for heat, we hunkered

in our heavy coats, cupped hands
around the perfect coal our mouths
would make, and waited

hours at the job
for our boss, a big man who paid us
small. Most of us

mostly asleep, hungover
on Sunday's drunk, a dream
of Mexico floating over the radio, Luis

told us about Veracruz, coasting
along the ocean in his father's Datsun, a dark girl
burrowed up beside him. *This*

was 1987 he said, his breath heavy,
English broken
into smoke. We leaned

to the heat he spoke of,
how he'd curl
his immigrant arm around her shoulder

and kill the headlights. And slowly,
the way the moon pulls
so much ocean in, he'd work

his thick fingers beneath her cotton
blouse, skirt her
worry, all the way down

to that skin he'd miss so badly
in Indiana. His father
got wind of a girl, pregnant

three months and knew— *knew* he said
it was his son. And somehow,
in the too early workday

it made sense he left, his love,
or whatever it was, ebbing away
into the radio's fading

memory of Mexico— immaculate
back seats, señoritas, the smooth
vinyl that would stick

to his skin come morning.
Those Mondays
we wondered who he was.

Early Mass, Ash Wednesday

And I feel like my grandfather again, in '56, him
walking for blocks to be there, front row, at Holy
Rosary.

I drove of course— it is cold in this millennium— and left
no children behind me or wife.

I am 27 and still
live with a dog and dinners in tinfoil.
At this age he'd made Hitler afraid, and fought
through work days longer than I am
awake. When he returned the house grew
silent around him and this
was a good silence like after crying or a couple
of beers and you both
know where the night will go. I have known

no such love, though Lent, I guess, is God's
way of saying *you too are dust, and he was. I will make you
radiant.*

In the pews we hunch like homeless in our coats, the cold
rising from our bodies as it rose, also, from his in Little Italy
which wasn't even hip then and was
only poor.

It is maybe the whole neighborhood here, like how,
in *The Godfather* or films whose names I don't remember now, the neighbors
raised statues in the streets. This means
his life was a movie,
and mostly this is how I think of it, the city
in black and white behind him, his climbing
the steps of the church to mass
as it was meant to be, with priests
and penguin nuns and everyone
you know is kneeling.

Here it is Ash Wednesday and death
still is something to be feared, like falling
from very high up. The priest—

please, will you rise.

Around me the congregation picks its coats and work clothes
from the pews. They lift themselves to their feet,

foreheads

smeared with black and white, and what
they have to do is outside still in the city's thick mass of factories, the ash
and slag heaps he worked
into fertile earth.

Androgyne

*"This one, at last, is bone of my bone,
and flesh of my flesh."*

It was before this of course,
before his sleep and slipped rib, the river
hymning softly beside him while he walked on, most days,
naming things— *banana*
slug, snail, clownfish. He found himself
happiest alone, swimming
or sunning on a rock, his bronze
body sexless, forever
wed to the one God he'd give
everything to please. Really there was no need
for a wife.

As when, in Parnell's bar, a blonde
undergraduate slips beside me
and says she does not understand
why I cannot take her home tonight. I tell her
she is beautiful, and that she exists
at all is a miracle and means I will walk
around most of my life to find my missing
rib. I want to remember
heaven. Eden at least. How like a child it is,
before I wanted to have sex with every woman
who paid me the slightest bit of attention. I try
to explain *celibate*, that faith
is difficult resisting but she is
blonde and I am
drunk and do not believe
we will remember what happens next.

She pulls me into the men's
restroom. I remember flesh, her fingers
lifting her skirt to show me all her
God parts, that perfect
world she was.

Dopplegänger

Except he is better
at everything. I am the leftovers to his whole

meal of manhood, the how much
less majestic a body is than God. That I'd give,

in flesh to be taken wherever, most of this weight, and what
security I've earned from life to look

that good in glasses is like saying the sky
is blue or that boys

have penises and his
is probably larger. He listens

to indie music, and most of my iTunes
is Taylor Swift. I've spent

entire nights trying to like it— Animal
Collective and Tears for Fears— sounds

like Godard films all French
and disenchanted. Even my friends have seen me

at places I've never been, the bars and architecture parties I'd pay
three covers to hover in, and awkwardly,

like an elephant in loafers and clothes from Old
Navy. He's taken

his boots and beaten them to just the right wear, and while
on one hand this is completely ridiculous I too

would like a pair of perfectly
crushed Manclers and to wear them out dancing

in places with names
like *Posh* and *Mañana*.

Women, I guess, have settled for less.
In the history of Western aesthetics there was also Duchamp,

and plaster statues smeared with shit. I am,
if we get down to it, more attractive than that. Still,

I can't explain the way
designer jeans work, or why

they fit him like skin itself. By now, though, you are thinking this is so
self-deprecating a poem and is maybe only a list and it is. His,

despite he is studying law and lung cancer
and carbon footprints, is perfect, the poem

I was born to write and for which I've been
looking all this time, like childhood or how,

in the days of naming, he ate and saw
himself everywhere then.

Circle Work

It is, finally, what my father taught me— that love
is acted, and extravagant
only in poems. So when you ask me, just once, for what

I cannot give— the gratuitous
tokens of emotion— I muster
poetry, the gauche

roses on your nightstand, sex. We lie,
afterward, in the vast
flatland of your bed, the blighted, moth-bitten

wires whining in the walls and what
will become of us uncertain still, like scientists
unable to say from which

mystery this
earth's humming comes. *Somewhere*
in the Pacific, the energy of distance storms is shifting

forms. Typhoons, you mean, those
circling towers of cloud worked slowly
into sound. Outside, the snow's own sighing rises

to your windows. I do not know
if I can love you, but shoveling is something
I have always done right. I remember

nights with my father, him
slinging whole piles behind him while I pushed
my own meager snow to cement's edge. He spoke

engine maintenance and baseball, the small,
accumulated kindnesses of night
shifts and dinners. So I give this again,

notch my boots and begin
the long digging out of your house. Your Honda
sits buried in the driveway and wears

its hat of snow and shoulders
of snow and is frozen
like a petrified dinosaur. I say *similes slip*

but you are listening to the wind. What I mean
is *this is useless, I know, it is snowing still*. I kick
the dumb rubber of your tires and they are ice. I lick

your windshield clean. You can believe
what you want of this but I am thinking of hills,
how we drove for miles that night

and watched the city shine. This
was Ithaca, your Civic
revving gently as the engine held us, votive,

in its *om*, its *whoosh*-ing like the womb. Below us,
all of history and science and whether
I loved you moved,

like ghosts, through the lit city
and we twisted and rose beneath the dome-
light. Like twins,

we untangled our limbs, permitted that big,
Japanese car to carry us
all the way back. What I mean is

we parked it in your driveway and winter came. We waited
months to shovel. I scrape the windows
like chiseling marble, I break

the tailpipes from their ice. Tomorrow you will drive
away from this place
and what I am saying will be silence. I will rise

and twist myself into simile
thinking of footprints, that perfect
ring I wrought, finally, in your driveway.

First Snow

I have, despite my father's admonishing, no shovel. I trudge
from my warm, eighth floor apartment to the corner Sunoco
and it is cold and this alone

takes an hour. By now the prices are gouged, appropriate, it seems, for small
appliances and wines, and when I leave this place the plows
have buried my home in snow. It is nowhere

I recognize, my life suddenly unfamiliar, as when, that first day,
they shuffled away in shame. Still, the world
is miles of shining, my shovel light. The entire

street gleams, trees heavy and bent like spent bodies while fall's
rotten fruit glistens in the drifts. Listen, I'm sorry;
this is ponderous as Frost. If my life were

a musical (and who
has wanted anything less), it is this scene I mean— the street
filling with neighbors while the ancient,

opposing gangs dissolve into song; our broadswords
beaten into shovels and swung, in unison, over shoulders; the old
words returning, *love* and whatever

heaven meant. Memory, understand, is something held,
like pain, in places west of language, the chambers
left thawing in the body. We talk

only of snow, though our muscles burn with the work. Our wrecked
sinews sing. It is, I have wanted to say so long, the lesser
disasters can bring us back, the bullets and black-

outs, the how we shovel this weight away and remember
everything— the patched asphalt, the apples, that
good ache we held long in our bodies before we ate.

Drunk Dial

Because.

Because my tongue.

Because my tongue is a split fish I forget

what I have told you soon as I say it. I make

no sense, syntax

slack as a paraplegic, as dreams

in which some inescapable fate like nakedness or whales is chasing you

and you cannot run.

In Renaissance England they believed each act

of intercourse shortened your life. That I'd like

to die tonight is not why I called.

You are, after all, 500 miles away, and we

have only kissed 4 times and taken each other's clothes off slowly only once.

We are young, and such a modern phenomenon

as this requires little

in the way of explanation. There is no good reason I mean—

Beyoncé is on; I have wanted

all day to dial your number and for this to be a kind of good thing like kissing. It is this

song I saw you the first time to. In Tim's— or Pixel, I forget— we listened

and looked across the crowd like how it goes

in that Counting Crows song or Bond films. We fell

like that

first falling into our Sex

on the Beaches and Becks, the rest

a history of me attempting anyway to here you, to yes

I can hear you clearly.

That I have managed to dial your number at all is a miracle, though you hear, I'm sure,

only static,

that bar hum and how

ridiculous this is like a mouthful of dirt or my ichthyous similes. I think

of all the ways this must have happened before, the failed and ancient

conversations at 4 a.m. in Eden. How Adam,

drunk off his rock, said *it happens* though

apple

was all she heard in return.

What I mean is Act 3. How the King's letter asks England to kill him,
and Hamlet, knowing
this,
intercepts it and says
I am set naked on your kingdom alone.
How it ends
is everyone dies. I hang up the phone and whether you have heard anything
in your listening is a mystery. I want you landline and logically. Want
a crooked bridge of kids with you and because. To stumble
home and know
you have heard this, the if/
then of it. That if Beyoncé is on I will call you. I will fall
every time.
If time is thick and distance too thrush a tongue. If you
love me, what—

Teaching You Shakespeare

First thing is you will die, and drunkenness
is not half so bad as that. Ask Falstaff.
How at the end of it there was nothing
he wouldn't give to get shitty again.
In Ithaca somewhere you stumble home
thinking of cliffs, the stiff salt of Dover
like dropping to the concrete. You will walk
all this night of your life finding no one
like a son to love you. Your mother, drunk
also at this hour, will howl and howl
and you'll continue to disappoint her
like daggers in the sad fact she held you
then, as I do now and name you something
in this nothing you'll never recognize.

New Painter

What I tell him is I too
voted Republican once, the white
high-school kid who shows up, 8 a.m.,
in jeans and clean
t-shirt ready to paint
the world. You will learn
there are people poorer than you
can imagine, and ladders—
that your strongest steel has a way
of wobbling. Also Luis. I want to explain
painting is not half the job,
that everything's prep, the patch
and sand, the sealer. Believe me,

I remember as well \$7 an hour, and 8 hours
a day is too long a time, I know, when you are 16
and your friends are wealthy.

You want to scream
for the whole unfair system of this—
their cars and college scholarships.

You are Communist.

You have painted 7 summers
and nothing covers.

Heavyweight Title

I am wholly inadequate for this is my first thought, the boxers
eyeing each other pre-fight like starved dogs, like God

pre-smiting or how, sizing me up from somewhere across the room you know
already it will end. I sink

deeper in the dark catharsis of couch cushions, this good
life of wine and whatever

pâté is made of on the table, its *a* with a hat exactly
the kind of letter I'd mention in poems

I know nothing about. The boxers flit across the flat-
screen TV like stinging insects, Switzerland

or maybe Vegas lit up behind them exotic
as a Bond film. At any minute, it seems, the Swiss crowd

will part and reveal some villain behind a rifle, black
tux failing to conceal the give-away

facial disfiguration received, years ago, at the hands
of our hero in Monte Carlo. Of course

this doesn't happen. I pass the Cabernet, make
small talk about the boxers, their bodies

sagging by now though nothing, yet, like my own
bones. I told you when we met it'd never work. We are talking

circles still. Like stars fixed in opposition, the boxers
revolve and draw, one from another, like sucking

stardust, their punches the size of planets, or maybe some other
metaphor is better. It will end badly anyway, as gravity

always does— with darkness and no decision. In the ring, they rest
like tired lovers on each other's shoulder. You don't know what it means

for everything to come to this, a single
image insisting it is over. It is over, I said, and this too you took.

Point of No Return

As in the intersection's sudden red, the pedal
on your '98 Chevy pressed to the floorboard
and braking is the last thing
on your mind. As in halfway
through Sunday's nine-
miler, a course you've never— not even once—
run together, your father asks what's to be done
when it's time for him to die. You want to say *God*
damnit Dad I didn't come back
to bury you, though really you can't
recall now why you're here, home
suddenly comforting the way passing
a car wreck is comfort. *Anyway you're fifty-two* is what
you tell him, *healthy as ever*, your breath condensing
into so much smoke because it's February here,
and halfway means every step again.

Beside you he's breaking
a sweat, says *remember when Grandma went—*
how by the end she recognized no one,
her own son. You say you won't
let it get like this— that if it comes to it
you'll load the old shotgun under his bed
with buckshot and stop it
behind the woodshed.

You understand this
is only another form of love, and wonder
what kind of thing it is
for a son to pay the debt
a dad will never ask. By now, you've passed
the Walthour house— *burnt down a month now* is how
he explains it— the empty lot, that look.
You'd like to believe you could do this
gracefully— the spent casing, the crack
of a single gunshot in his eighty-second year—
except you understand it will be
everything ugly. Some quiet Tuesday. You'll walk in,
late for your morning coffee and fall,

sobbing, beside the body. You push
the pace and still you cannot shake him.

Concert Call

It is clear, now, as nights I watched Orion string his bow overhead, the hunter
wheeling in what
the Hebrews believed was the ceiling of us, the flood
gates and God space we know, though, is endless. I don't
remember anything.

In the beginning, or a little
after that, it was static. Getting back to it now admits the marble we are made of,
that dust we was
in some other life the size of.

Somewhere you are holding your cell
phone to the sky. I hear
only the wind, Springsteen
tinny and distant like the cans we strung up Sundays we were young.

You said you heard me, but I did not believe.
Each week I was older.

How it goes is "Mary feel your blood mixed with mine" is *The Rising* I've memorized it.
I think

of you
in the middle of thousands, a crowd
of cigarette lighters and the tiny
glow of cell phones flipped open. They flow
back and forth like the antenna of primitive sea creatures,
their clusters like some
manmade constellation we came from. And suddenly,

the way the bass drops, we've done it
again, that God-
space raining light as sound, someone
called the Boss shot from satellite to satellite and arriving, still, in my living
room lucid.

He booms in my head hard
as marble carved to a man. You move through the unnamed
stadium seeking a signal, some
hunter done strung up and gutted me.

Recurring Dream: Jail

That I have been wronged is obvious. I am the dead
man walking and the star
of Shawshank. Also

that Billy Joel song, the Gospels.
I grab my ankles and wait.

When they beat me I bleed in my sheets like the saying,
in second grade,
if you die here

your mind believes it and quits. What living
I have known is nothing, some other life. I limp in this
ranked atrium shuffling from meal to meal,

its massive
organic structure like something
God would build, a body almost or mother. I remember
trees. The feeling of fall.

I have clawed my nails away on these walls
and written nothing. I pace
the cage like a trapped animal.

When the Baptist asked him, from jail,
are we to wait, he made
even the deaf blessed. My bed is no prison, I admit,
but if men are dead it's doubt that shrouds us.

I am tangled in the blankets.

They have taken my head already
though its platter is gleaming in my dreams.

My dumb
mouth opens and closes like a movie on mute, soundless, but I think
I am singing.

Exhaust

It is, almost, like something from a hot rod magazine, *Lowrider*
or one of those sundry others, some

blonde with a bottle for her body on the cover. Of course there is no such girl
in our garage, my father alone beneath the car

adjusting something I do not understand. It is the Grand
Am I have driven home this Christmas, though mostly

it's unrecognizable now, its new wheels gleaming, windshield
clean as it has not been, it seems, since 16.

In the corner a kerosene heater hisses with the radio, something low
filling the garage with that tinny 60's sound while I circle the car and watch.

Along the walls my ancient playthings are stacked, like museum pieces, to the ceiling—
plastic bats, basketballs. I'd forgotten, I realize, my ice skates from the second grade, ankles

aching now as the feeling of falling, the pond's
sick cracking comes back through the static. It is, after all, the stereo I'd asked

him to fix, the driver's side speaker on the fritz— his term— its
spitting like a child. I have driven

thousands of miles with music like a whine though why
he thinks he can fix it is a mystery. *Listen, we are*

resigned to silence I say, *I'm swimming in it*. He tries the dial, *Don't Worry*
Be Happy coming in patchy like satellites

pulling signals from the stars, like my father above the ice, something
beautiful almost though far, McFerrin insisting on this. Do not worry. We

will sing still, fill our lungs and live, somehow, on this and this
alone. He lifts

the custom-installed, round, red speaker in his hands, and how
an umbilicus curls to the womb the wires dangle from the door.

He dials us in again, holds it there like the crying
child he raised.

Recurring Dream In Which The World Ends

Every night something is falling from the sky—
rocks the size of Wisconsin, space shuttles, the sun.
In one, I am somewhere far from home
and know this implicitly, as one knows, in waking life,
that he will die. I have been, for no reason I
remember, watching a middle-school softball game,
and am walking back to the car I don't own
when I see its streak of fire above the field— meteor, satellite, I
do not know except it is big and coming in
too quickly to run from. It is dream reasoning, I know,
but I think if I could only make it to the pool
(there is a pool) then perhaps I could survive.
Why I believe this is a mystery but is the reason
I write. Last night also there was falling. We watched
the shuttle climb higher into the sky, and slow,
and begin again the sick descent, and I knew then it would end
badly for us— my mother, who took me in her arms
like all the water in the world, and waited for rapture.
That last evaporation that leaves us standing,
intact, on the concrete bottom.

Target Practice

It is New Year's Day in Fort Wayne. Past our backyard, the yews
stand dark against the horizon's fireworks, their wet
limbs heavy though stretching still with somewhat
the grace and angle of arms. Celan: it is, therefore, a sin

to speak of trees. What type of fire-
works they are I do not know, their rolling
like the distant artillery on TV shows or those
news programs from Baghdad. This is, I admit,

not important. The pellets my father loads
in his childhood rifle could pierce the skin of small
animals but mostly we shoot yews. I have killed two
house flies in my life. We lie on the back patio firing at the crude

circle I've worked in red paint on the trunk, my shots
wide every time like trying to say, with certainty, how fire works or why
we are likely to be silent. He lifts
the thick stock to his shoulder, the old

weapon heavier now as he notches the bulls-eye
in his sight. If I am
this man's son it is wondrous
like the virgin birth or that earth

itself exists. He hits the center with every shot, the cock and notching
a single, seamless motion like finally
expressing heaven without metaphor— wedding banquet,
a reign. In Iraq,

my high school classmates and cousins— none of my
brothers understand, no sons— are stuffed
in body bags and caskets I cannot see. I can see this
becoming some New Year's tradition, the kitchen

smelling of sauerkraut and custard, in the backyard my father
sighting rifles, firing without missing,
hitting every time the dead
center, the men I might have been.

That she should be here now,
at the hour of church bells & beds too warm to leave them,
is inconceivable. Time was
you and I were
the only ones rose, the ones
unpacked our bags & sat all day making statues of ourselves. You said *no sonnet*
is Kahn so we stacked our reading to the ceiling.

table, its grain familiar as skin, its dinner
the dinner of work &, one night, we made its hinges sing. Your sweat
left rivers in the wood. This woman,

Far from here you are folding
laundry in a living
room I have never seen. On TV, I imagine I don't know, the Ghostbusters
hunting Slimer in some library, aisles
of books raining their pages, a table
waving its legs like some helpless, spinning insect.
Once,
we watched this all day and did not rise except
to start it again. I think
of you humming softly to its theme song. Who? Who
are you going to call? You dog
me even now. Your couch,

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Hood Riding

is what they call it next day in the papers.
From night, and miles outside the city,

the kids are getting shit-faced
in Ferraris and Cadillacs. He lifts

a bottle of vodka, strawberry,
from beneath the seat of his father's

Impala. He passes it back, the girls,
immaculate in silk and chiffon, and not

wanting to seem like girls anymore but maybe
women, tip it to their lips. They giggle. He shifts

the car into drive while his buddy, riding shotgun
and guzzling the liquor, says *left*.

I know a road.

What the paper says is fresh
pavement and age, but all things are more difficult

than this. At sixty, the kid slides down the passenger
window and shimmies to the windshield, limbs

gone Vitruvian in their crude X across the glass.
His tux flutters, and what

he is thinking is *I am young*
now, as I will never be again. The girls

are giggling still. The driver, 17 and believing
tonight is the night to end

all nights, slows,
says *go*

ahead give it a try.

It is too much for a poem to show this—
the girl's stumbling to the front of the car

and climbing across the hood, and him. The heady
acceleration, engine

rumbling up through the steel and shaking the frame
of their bodies, two bent

X's in a kind of sex except
the million insects stinging their skin

and also the screeching wheels and the way
the turn comes from nowhere and throws them,

slow motion, to the road. Her red dress
like injured wings, and what

you should never have to remember is that sickening
crunch inside the car, the cry

of the final song when you sat and watched
the dance of GM steel and skin.

Shoveling

Sundays too we tried
every illness we could think of— upset stomach,
the mumps— laid up faking fever in our bunk beds and wondering
if he'd come. It didn't matter

that of our dozen, reasonably decent neighbors
none of them shoveled. We rose anyway
when our father called us, and trudged downstairs to the mud-
room where, by the light of a single bulb,

we buried ourselves
in wool coats and overalls, the arms
too tight sometimes so we helped each other in the way, I imagined,
real men did— roughly— and though I would not admit it

with love. Our father of course had never slept, had sat up
all night and watched it arrive like the invasion
of some small country— the orange sky, the storm
rolling in like soldiers. We drove

our shovels deep in the driveway's three feet of snow, the same
thankless motion our great-
grandfathers made in the mountains of northern Germany
and years later the same

devotion their daughters, on hands and knees, scrubbed
sidewalks with in the city. This,
our father would say, is the reason we shovel, why,
morning after morning, we rise simply to move

snow from one place to another. To accept this
Midwest as blessing when it blows
it back in our faces, the way, even now, history gets
all cyclical sometimes. Like a flood unstuffing the stuff

we'd forgotten from the mud, the shovels and other
small things of this living. Once
we had no land. We worked the impossible
hours of the poor and prayed hard for something like an invasion

to save us. We shoveled. We lived
decently in the driveway that day, the dark street
sleeping as we scraped clean the earth so
it would some day give us up.

Solemnity

"Mary gave birth to God."

-St. Anselm

But you are Rebecca. *Captivating*, in the Hebrew. *Binding*. You gave birth
to bitterness, your twins
slick masses, a mess of hairy chest & desert. If we expected
salvation, it has failed us. It is no one's fault.

This feast was my favorite in the days before I knew you, now
it is simply winter. The walls leak cold. When it comes
next year it is you I'll pray to.

Tonight, the floors are freezing & my knees numb. I know
there are words the history of this has given
weight but they are veiled. I am waiting
for yours. That e-mail is what

we are doing this in means sin is a living thing, like organs
on ice overnight. I kneel
in front of the screen but catch myself & stop. If I wobble
on the maudlin, I'm sorry. I am sorry

anyway. I want to be bodiless, to love you immaculate as that
first birth & believe again that God
could walk. Once, we expected everything & vessels
held us. Maybe language too

is twin. Across town you type *it isn't right* & I
should know this already, I admit, but there are miles
of history between us. You say

it is better this way though what you mean is Hebrew.
I believe you though I cannot read. It is freezing here
where hearts beat.

Barbasol

The can, it seems to me now, has not changed
in ages, the same
red and white stripes climbing its cool,
blue barber's pole as when I practiced
years ago
in my parents' bathroom.

In the beginning it was a tube it tells me on the internet,
though this must have been Old
Testament we're talking, like God
in a bright cloud of lather and commandments.
The mountain
covered in hair.

How I think of it this morning is, like memory, inseparable
from scent, its creamy, astringent smell
light
in my cupped palms like prayer is—
but you already know this is a poem
about my father, or fathers
at large. How most of life is trying
to like them.

How Sundays only he'd show you the way
it goes— that gleaming
can of cream next to the sink. Straight blade and brush,
a cup
to rinse it in. You think,

often and not
without a little shame,
of your toy set of shaving things, and singing
Roy Orbison that morning while he moved
the razor, strip by strip,
across his skin. He says
every man misses a spot— that difficult
joining of jawbone and neck like a knuckle, the nick
of chin that will resist you
all your life like a son. But what

you remember is swearing
you'd shave it all, that come
Sunday you'd run
your own razor straight
over every inch of skin and miss
not one of your father's spots.
You promised
you'd watch the Barbasol, like God, leave
a new
face in the foam, and this
is what I do this morning while the mirror steams up
and something I do not know plays on the radio.
I rinse
in the faucet, my father
far off in some other, second life I might
write of again some day but which I am happy now allowing
to roll down the drain as I walk away
smelling of heaven, this toilet
paper in pieces on my cheeks.

Drive-Thru Car Wash

Somewhere my father refuses to believe this— that I will not
rise. That a man can sit permitting a machine
to clean him without guilt. That God

allows it. Though I know he is watching
somewhere in Indiana, I cannot lather the car and clean it.
Beneath me, the heater purrs like some jungle cat, its caged

flame filling the car as I align the tires, the track hauling me grimly,
inevitably in. On the radio, Seger yields to static.
The cavernous mouth devours me.

In my sixth year as his son,
he took me to watch the cars it was his job
to wreck. I remember whole

families of dummies dying
as the high-velocity sled launched Hondas to the wall.
When the soap begins I go speechless and see

only suds. If someone is in front of me, that movement
is the line's survival, the pile-up's
eliding. Like huge tongues, the rollers lower and lick

the salty steel clean. I am capable, I know,
of no such love. I look
from side to side not knowing how this will go

but going anyway toward the light. My life—
such work I do now is no way to raise a family. What
could my father have done?

The dryers wipe me clean.
Beneath me, this big
American engine stalls and I float

slowly to the road. I remember it was this, he said,
could kill a man— the modern
fins of Fords, at forty miles an hour like how

a blade will bleed you. I brake but this is useless.
I stare at the gleaming edges of cars, coast
downward to the dark and automatic traffic.

Monster Truck Show

"6 year old killed at Tacoma Dome"

But when the carburetor came you covered
your other son, judged
wrong the rate and angle, how steel
careens. You can feel
still how it did not hit, the sick
thud and sudden shame, the shock
unstoppable now like, you
know, a motor
throwing its pieces to the seats.

I was, of course, nowhere
near this. On the internet I read the trucks—
monsters, yes— went
centrifugal when they hit,
their uncontrolled donuts like that
kind of power no poem will touch.

Wrecked engines
spinning pistons into the crowd, spark plugs like gunfire. No father
deserves this, to witness
his son struck, the gushing, the girl
beside him crimson with it, her blouse
like a white flag reddened. They said
his head was roses— no, I wrote this— whole
pails of petals spilling in the concrete arena.

The random happens like that— you are laughing
and then—

Save you, the show goes on, those
huge trucks circling the dirt, the crowd
tossing down Styrofoam cups to get the medics' attention.

There will be no miracle here. How it ends
is metaphor, the gentle
empathy I extend and you will
mostly refuse.

Recurring Dream: War

But this isn't anywhere
desert. The 20th century— its tanks and explanations
for this— is something no one in my dreams will see. Most likely
it is Germany in the time of tribes
though Russell Crowe is nowhere. New Hampshire
except the redcoats are hellish.
How I've arrived here after a day
of grading papers and playing Wii is why
the mind remains a mystery, its ridges like the roof
of the mouth and how
the ocean floor is fissure and ditch.
Pitch-black. Mapped
sporadic as a galaxy. Fact:
they've charted Mars with more precision.

Off the coast of Chile exists a sound of such
low frequency it means the origin
is bigger than blue
whales and what
scale our language weighs. Of explanations,
the most logical is monster.

Even its name reduces us
to *Bloop*, the broken
onomatopoeia of dreams I am drowning in
nightly now, though I do not know why
we are fighting.

There seems to be some great invasion underway,
of my home by hosts
of British and Indians. Visigoths. Gauls. Also
I live in trees. They are dear to me as maybe
no home could be and I have built
ramparts in their branches. Still,
when I am stormed by every Other I run.
In the single, definitive instance of manhood— hordes
swarming through my forest— I find
a place with the women and children and begin
to shiver. I am sorry

if this is offensive to everyone. What dreams reveal is
that we shit,
and sit on the subway most days in total terror.

I have tried to fight,
but they are men the size of sound. How it ends
is my death, the dark
bedroom as I left it. I drag my shame
across the kitchen to shit, and flip through Freud
on the toilet. That we came from ocean is no
explanation so I make one. This too fails. I flush it
all the way back to *bloop*.

Break-Up Poem

You have held these things so long inside you like pearls, my plausible
flaws— that fucking is no kind of rose, that once

we brought up the dawn with our talking. Of course
you are right. *You write me*

post-it notes but no poetry. I pay
for your dinner with nickels.

In those days we stayed
sleepy all morning and ordered Chinese food online. *You licked*

the chicken from my fingers. I find
rice everywhere now.

Like Hamlet's father those lives lie here
helping themselves to the leftovers.

In tones of terrible sadness they ask
for what we cannot give, again to surrender our sand.

I see them even now. Naively tasting the grain. Working its surface
to a flawless argument. Your mouth is filled with this— the little

failures we became and if I remember those days I do not
admit it though I do. I too

taste only your skin with my chicken. I listen but do not speak
Chinese. It is no one's fault. When finally

you are silent we sit weathering that
wind too. It works us solid as armor, as arches

of sandstone hewn to toothpicks. In penciling
you everywhere I wanted to forget this— the car ride home and how

what I did not tell you was yes. Yes,
we are flesh but such future

as we have is here in tooth and nail. Nothing
is perfect, and the work of what

saves us is something
neither shiny or fair. How far

I drove alone that night you'll never know. Ghosts
circling the car like fog, while the radio

spit forgiveness I could not
swallow.

Poem By Christopher Kempf

“At last, someone rappin’ ‘bout blunts and broads,
tits and bras, ménage à trois, sex and expensive cars.”

-*The Notorious B.I.G.*

Also fathers. And not
to demean her but how, in the many bedrooms we made sweat, her chest flushed
and fucking, then,
was something strange and could save us. How once

an apple was fruit, but falling too is too
useful a form. No father

is God, I know, though what
I have written are the million revisions of this. That sometimes
he took me to work. That when he finished in the shower I saw,
and knew then how much a man is
animal. I am

nostalgic still for cartoons and the taking
of naps, how not, every minute I am
awake, to want. Such work

I have done is damming
the wind in most of my poems— it is spoken, see! And the night, so
new and various, hath really neither sadness or sirens. I’m sorry, it was only evoking.

In poking small animals I meant everything death.
I’ve dreamt— I confess it!— and spent
whole days remembering it metaphor.

If I was poor once— and this is true— I grew
out of it and have written *I am in it still* have stolen
even poverty and taken break-ups and love and the little
scars beneath her breasts she accepted solely
for me. Most of what I mean by real work is
when summer came and I painted. I’ve mined

America raw and all
I got was this t-shirt and the freedom

to speak. I smoke cigarettes recklessly, bend
every metaphor to fit.

How the walls wept. How when
this is over
there will be not a single simile though I am
single now and no
sex will have me.

Mitgliedschaft

I can smell still the sauer-
kraut, his confined body in the next room
refusing to move while my relatives— the many

plain faces I had
no names for— filed past it.

In the kitchen I hid
beneath the plank table he'd taken, they said,
a single Saturday to finish, its fitted

joints aching with potato weight and gravy, grandmother
mixing flour with her crying on the counter.

I understood nothing
of the coming and going of strangers, sat

cross-legged and watched in silence the polite
shuffling of pant legs and dresses, the dark
beneath the table like a cage.

Later that day my father would follow
me to the basement and explain the way

it worked. How when he was young the years were filled
with violence, and that a life is long
enough sometimes to forget this. *Listen*, he said,

pointing to the floorboards above us, the muffled
hum of mourning and loss, *I loved him anyway. The work*

we are called to is forgiveness. I listened
to the creaking beams and believed this
or wanted to, that I could live forever in this

mystery of schnitzel and something
big. The basement

ached with my wanting his father-
land, his lies that we were not
already in the earth.

Randy

“The one act of the penis
Over which we have more control
Than they do.”

-George Bilgere, *Jennifer*

Except even now she's between us, one
immaculate hand on each of us peers, and if peers
is not a word my need for it is reason

enough to allow it. How in saying she's between us
I mean really we are alone and that aloneness
itself is solid and blonde. How bodies

in proximity whisper. When he unzips I think
of the million instances he's done it for her, how,
each night I've fallen asleep to the TV, he's taken

that same, impossibly-bigger-than-my-own boner out and how
she's responded with something crazy I can't
even imagine. I glance

sideways and we eye each other like starved dogs.
He has, of course, no idea who I am. I've watched him
only from a distance, him

listening with more devotion than I've shown
anything in my life while she talks softly and with that
peculiar tilt of her head about Foucault and the aesthetics of Renaissance sculpture.

I am standing with my dick in my hand, like those monkeys at the jungle exhibit.
The bathroom gleams like a museum of working
urinals, clinical and cold, no place,

despite the metaphor of her presence, for a girl. We have given
the requisite empty between us. Still,
I can hear his prodigious pissing as it hits

the porcelain, its hissing the whole
history of them, of diners and valentines, of nights they made
even the sex jealous. I've spent

entire poems and gotten no closer to her than him
shaking it dry when he's done. We flush. Tuck
our respective members away and face

the mirrors. It is more than sex I want, believe me. It is
to sheath our penises, and poetry. Why,
in two millennia, we have written only this.

Have come back to our bathrooms and stood at the sinks,
side by side, and tried
to wash our hands of her.

Rebecca

You have no idea, of course, I confess it. I've faked my way through everything
& will probably continue. I remain, to this day, incapable of a language
that conjugates shame. I'm not sorry.

Still, there were years, it seems to me now, we never left that house,
couched ourselves in bed & meant exactly what we said by *sex*. Our names
were all the God we wanted though probably this was some other us. It's yesterday

we met. In the Lost Dog you ordered the Berry Brie Chicken & I didn't. I was thinking
there must be some other way to say this, a language neither chicken or simile—
that sometimes you will despise me. That most nights I will fight you with silence

& spoon the wall like a knife. No one deserves this. You listened as I spoke instead
of poetry & told you it was different, that simile
could save us. Maybe this is true. I tried honesty it was no way to make

a relationship work. What we want are circles. To let
the veil remain & mystify us nightly. Remember it was Veterans Day? You drove me
home through parades & parades & we could not hear for the tubas. We moved

slow as old soldiers through that music, drowning in the sound. Everywhere there were
veterans. They held their heads, helpless to remember though you remained Rebecca.

I said let us keep our secrets girl. God does.

Lifting Weights After Our Break-Up

But you do not care. You cannot possibly conceive
how clichés explain me, the Mighty
Bosstones singing something kitschy & ridiculous
on the radio this morning like a mother.

What men do is dumb, understand this. We sit
in a single place & pump metal til it hurts.
How Lear says this is listen, things
would hurt me more but it's storming. I am sore as Sunday.

On my floor last night I lied when I said I meant this.
You wanted reasons, & to believe
we needed them is the sentence we did not speak. Cordelia: no cause, my lord,
no cause. In place of these, I was movie scenes— Benjamin Braddock

& DiCaprio. I wrote poems around my reasons, like the trees
surrounding Eden. When you asked me to clarify I recited *sparks*.

What I think of now, though, is coming home the first time
I'd carried my heart in my hands. How my mother
wiped the blood from the floor & followed me
all that month with her love. I'd said nothing but she knew.

When you asked me if I cried I tried to. Toward the end
he says you are men, though you might still be stone.
I lift the thick bones of the barbells & believe him,
the gym filled with how far we've come from creation, clichés

raining down like they could save us. Yesterday maybe.
We talked for hours while the moon rose fat as that
first night. When whatever God you want to believe in
lifted its perfect surface into the sky. Set it gently

in heaven before it fell. You tell me I am an idiot. Yes.
It begins like this.